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ANOTHER ATTEMPT AT INTERPRETATION OF AENEID 4

Every careful student of the Aeneid always has been, and every such student always will be, profoundly interested in the fourth book of the poem. In THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 8.169-170 I gave a list of papers, published not long before that time, in America, in which this book had been very carefully discussed. In a review of a recent School edition of Aeneid 4, printed elsewhere in this issue, I quoted an attempt by an English scholar, Mr. Freeman, at interpretation of the book. The matter is so interesting and so important that I quote here in extenso a note on Aeneid 4.393 at *pius Aeneas*. . . , published in The Classical Quarterly 12.146-147 (July and October, 1918), by an English scholar, Mr. Gilbert Norwood, in an article entitled *Vergiliana* (12.141-150):

Aeneas' treatment of Dido has been endlessly discussed, but I believe that something remains to be said concerning Vergil's conception of his hero's situation and conduct. About Dido we are all agreed, and I have no wish to comment further on that magnificent picture. But the Trojan's weakness, treachery, and futility—what of these? Everyone detests him, if only for a moment. Henry, for instance, writes of "the heartless, cold-blooded seduction of Dido by the hero of the Aeneid". Why has Vergil elaborately defamed the figure which dominates his epic?

In a sense, there is no problem at all. To speak bluntly, the poet's basic conception of the plot in this book is quite simple, quite admirable, quite in accord with his whole design. Throughout the first half of the Aeneid <Aeneas> is shown pressing on through blunders, distractions, dangers, ceaselessly to Latium. At Carthage he finds his mightiest obstacle. To the Trojan Africa offers with one hand love, with the other a city already building. He is shown baffled and sorely tested by a supreme emotional temptation over which he triumphs at last. He suffers, but—there is the vital fact—none of his actions are his own. He, like Dido, is the tool of Heaven. At every point it is a god which rules the action. Juno, by the aid of Venus, forces Dido to love the stranger. During the storm which spoils the hunting party she forces Aeneas to become the Queen's lover. Mercury, at Jupiter's bidding, forces Aeneas to desert Dido. He *cannot* stay because he must hearken to the commands of Heaven: 'Italiam non sponte sequor' (v. 361). No blame whatever attaches to Aeneas. Such, as I said, is the poet's basic conception—terrible, noble, and consistent with the spirit of the whole Aeneid.

My reader is of course dissatisfied. But why? Because, as a fact, the basic conception has been badly carried out. Vergil's performance is pulled awry by two potent forces which reveal themselves as the action proceeds.

The first is his interest in Dido. She has grown on his hands far beyond the slight secondary figure he at first meditated—an earlier Lavinia—and engages our attention much more deeply than her lover. The case is precisely the same as in The Merchant of Venice. Our sympathies go all awry because in Shakespeare's despite (as it might seem) Shylock grows from the sordid scoundrel he first projected to a dominant and formidable stature: the end of the trial-scene is detestable, exactly as the close of Aeneas' final interview with Dido is detestable. So deeply do we care for the Queen that her sufferings, whatever justification the Trojan

may claim, appear to wreck his credit forever. We are deaf to the magnificent pathos of his own heartbreak <441-449>. Probably not one reader in twenty remembers these superb lines, because his ears are filled with—
saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset
ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula
luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret,
non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer.

(vv. 327 sqq.)

Yet Vergil could feel for both, if we cannot.

The second reason is less obvious, but of still greater importance. We are not satisfied with Book IV. as a whole, simply because we do not believe in the gods. When we are not listening to Dido, we are thinking of Aeneas: at Jupiter, Juno, Venus, and Mercury we glance dourly over our shoulder when they speak, and forget them utterly when their words are ended. But they rule the action! Could we realize their existence and power as vividly as Dido's love and despair, our verdict on the poem would be altered completely. And here lies Vergil's vast failure—his one vast failure in this Book; he has not succeeded in making us believe as we read that Juno and the rest are even more real than Dido—and no less than that (one writes it with all respect) it was his plain business to do. We do not believe in Zeus and the inspiration of the Delphic oracle, but while reading the Choephoroe we experience all the emotions which Aeschylus intended to arouse, not simply a horror of matricide. The weakness, then, of this Fourth Book is certainly not that Aeneas acts shamefully, but that Vergil, having pinned his every chance of success to our belief in the gods, has failed to produce that belief in us effectively.

C. K.

REVIEWS

- Titii Livi Ab Urbe Condita Liber I. Edited with Introduction, Notes, Index of Proper Names, and Vocabulary, by C. E. Freeman. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press (1917). Pp. 198. 70 cents.
- Selections from Ovid. Edited with Introduction, Notes, Index of Proper Names, and Vocabulary, by C. E. Freeman. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press (1917). Pp. 128. 70 cents.
- Virgil: Aeneid IV. Edited with Introduction, Notes, Index of Proper Names, and Vocabulary, by C. E. Freeman. Oxford: at the Clarendon Press (1917). Pp. 107. 70 cents.
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- The Essentials of Latin Syntax. An Outline of the Ordinary Prose Constructions, Together with Exercises in Composition Based on Caesar and Livy. By Charles Christopher Mierow. Revised Edition, With Vocabulary. Boston: Ginn and Company (1917). Pp. x+186. \$1.20.

¹Even her suicide cannot be completed without the intervention of Iris.